



Why the Gullah/Geechee Communities Don't Evacuate

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Overview

The Gullah/Geechee people have occupied the barrier islands and the coastal areas of the Southeastern Atlantic states for more than three centuries. They are the descendants of Africans imported to the Coastal Atlantic states and the barrier islands to provide the labor for cotton, rice, and indigo plantations. After the Civil war, much of the newly freed population stayed on the sea islands without the former plantation masters. In relative isolation, the Gullah/Geechee people developed a unique culture including cuisine, religious and artistic expression, and a distinct dialect. Bridges from the islands to the mainland were built between 1950 and 1960.

The Gullah/Geechee culture is now under pressure from resort developments, increasingly severe weather events, and rising sea levels. The barrier islands and the southeastern low country are particularly vulnerable to hurricanes, tropical storms, and flooding. It is regularly reported that in the face of mandatory evacuation orders along the coast, the Gullah/Geechee communities, in large part do not evacuate. The following case study examines responses of the Gullah/Geechee communities to evacuation notices. It examines the degree to which race, culture, and economic status influence evacuation decisions.

Introduction

The Gullah/Geechee people developed a unique cultural response to life in largely insular communities on plantations on the sea islands and along the coasts. After the civil war, they remained in distinct communities on the islands. The maintenance of the large African communities allowed the Gullah people to retain African cultural artifacts including names, cuisine, arts and crafts, music, and religious beliefs. Most notable of the Gullah/Geechee people was the merging of several African languages with English to form a distinct creole dialect. That dialect has a distinct vocabulary and grammatical rules.

After the civil war and the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment, many of the newly freed slaves remained on the islands, many of them purchasing farmland and establishing thriving communities. They sustained themselves by farming, hunting, and fishing. Even though the size of the island communities has diminished, 200,000-250,000 native islanders can still be found in distinct Gullah/Geechee communities along the Atlantic Coast.

In part to escape the violent repression of the post-reconstruction era, the former slaves established communities in the relative safety of the sea islands. The Gullah/Geechee people can still be found on Sea Island, Edisto Island, St. Helena Island, St. Simons Island, Hilton Head Island, and Sapelo Island. In North Carolina and South Carolina, these communities are referred to as Gullah communities. In Georgia the sea islanders in communities near and below the mouth of the Ogeechee River are referred to as Geechee.

In recognition of the unique Gullah/Geechee culture and its contributions to southern culture, Congress established the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor in 2006. The Corridor stretches from Pender County North Carolina to St. John's County in Florida. The Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission was established to coordinate efforts across the corridor to preserve Gullah/Geechee culture and communities. The National Heritage Area program is managed by the U.S. National Park Service.

The barrier islands along the southeast Atlantic Coast are vulnerable to hurricanes, tropical storms, and floods. Hurricane Matthew approached the islands in 2016 and Hurricane Florence approached the islands and the Atlantic Coast in 2018. The governor of South Carolina issued mandatory evacuation orders in both cases. As those storms approached the coast, local and national print and broadcast media took note of resistance to evacuation orders in Gullah/Geechee communities. This case study examines whether those assertions were true, and if they were, what was the basis of the resistance. Specifically, this case study examines how race, culture, and income status influence decisions to evacuate.

Methodology

Orderly and efficient evacuation in the face of a significant weather event, particularly hurricanes and flooding, can save lives. It is well known that some portion of the population will resist or refuse evacuation orders. Social scientists have investigated this issue and have identified variables that they believe influence decisions to remain in the endangered areas. This study examines the reasons given by members of the Gullah/Geechee communities for resistance to evacuation orders. The reasons given in those interviews were compared to the results of academic research about why people resist evacuation orders.

Available literature and research on reasons given by individuals who chose not to evacuate in the face of evacuation orders and approaching storms was reviewed. The results of the literature review were compared to the reasons expressed by members of Gullah/Geechee communities. The study concentrates on members of the Gullah/Geechee community who had experienced at least one hurricane on the Sea Islands. Interviews took place by telephone, in barber shops, at a beauty shop, and at a community meeting at the historic Penn School on St. Helena Island. As a condition of the interviews, the author agreed that names would not be attached to comments unless individuals consented to the use of their name in a document that might be published.

The case study was also informed by interviews with organizations that advocate on behalf of the Gullah/Geechee community. Finally, there were interviews with emergency management officials in two counties with significant Gullah/Geechee populations within their borders.

Most of the information analyzed for this case study is specific to Beaufort County, South Carolina. The county contains several barrier islands, including St. Helena's Island and Hilton Head Island, and is the home of the largest and oldest Gullah communities in the United States. In the event of a mandatory evacuation order, the entire county, including all of the islands are directed to evacuate.

Discussion

The Sea Islands and the coastal lowlands are increasingly vulnerable to hurricanes, floods, and rising sea levels. As hurricane Matthew approached the Carolina coasts in October of 2016 and as Hurricane Florence approached the coast in September of 2018, the Atlantic Coast governors issued evacuation orders to the coastal counties. The Gullah/Geechee communities appeared unmoved by the evacuation orders.

Safe and orderly evacuations are an important element of emergency planning in hurricane-prone states. Effective evacuation plans can save thousands of lives during hurricane season. It is important to understand barriers to evacuation so that appropriate countermeasures can be

developed and implemented. This case study explores the interplay among race, culture, economic status, and emergency management policy and procedures.

Resistance to evacuation in the face of oncoming storms have been a matter of academic interest for some time. In his study of why families do not evacuate, Dr. Earl Baker identified the following important variables¹:

- **Age:** All studies note that the older population is, the more resistant they are to evacuation orders. But the identification of age may mask other issues. Medical issues and mobility issues are more prevalent in the older population. Notwithstanding advanced age, the resistance might really be related to lack of mobility or dependence on medication or medical machinery (may be related to mobility).
- **Risk level:** Individuals may conclude that in fact they are near the boundaries of the evacuation zone. In those cases, they may conclude that they are not in immediate danger and that evacuating a mile or two will not significantly change the level of risk.
- **Action by public officials:** The conduct of public officials can have a substantial impact on evacuation rates. The wording and dissemination methods of warnings and orders are important. Where the distinction between voluntary and mandatory evacuations are not made clear, the notice is likely to be taken as non-compulsory advice. Door to door notices are likely to be taken as more aggressive and serious signals than television and radio announcements. Emergency managers should secure the assistance of trusted community leaders and institutions in the dissemination of information.
- **Housing:** The quality and location of housing influences calculations of risk. In some instances, individuals may feel that their homes were built to resist hurricane force winds and that their home is more secure than available housing options.
- **Previous hurricane experience:** Individuals may base evacuation decisions on previous experiences with evacuation orders or having successfully weathered a storm without evacuation. Unfortunately, past experiences with a storm is no basis for future experience.
- **Perception of personal risk:** Individuals find themselves at different levels of risk due to their personal circumstances. Residents of beachfront property or low-lying areas that have suffered from repeated flooding will view their individual vulnerabilities differently than those who live in homes built to survive hurricane force winds. The personal perception of risk affects evacuation decisions.

¹ Hurricane Evacuation Behavior, Earl J. Baker, International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters, August 1991, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp.287-310.

Dr. Stacy Willett conducted research to determine why some people don't evacuate. Her findings were widely reported in 2018². She concluded that the important factors were:

- **Age:** Age is commonly identified as a variable in evacuation decisions. But age may be a proxy for other issues. Significant health and mobility limitations increase with age. Clearly, as emergency managers develop evacuation plans, local emergency managers should conduct an analysis to determine the presence and distribution of the elderly in the covered area.
- **Gender:** Dr. Willett notes that women tend to be more risk averse. They are also more likely to be caregivers for both young and elderly members of the family. For that reason, emergency managers are well advised to target female members of the household in their messaging.
- **Previous experience:** Residents along the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts are subject to relatively frequent watches, warnings, and evacuation orders. The resort and leisure industry are particularly resistant to interruptions of economic activity. When recent warnings have resulted in minimal impacts on social and economic activity, residents may be inclined to wait out impending storms.
- **Cost:** Evacuation is not a cost-free proposition. Evacuation orders do not discriminate according to economic resources. There should be an expectation that a certain portion of the designated evacuation area simply does not possess the economic resources to finance an evacuation. Some residents do not have cash on hand, a credit card, or cannot afford to miss work for an indeterminate period of time.
- **Pets:** Earlier emergency management plans were not required to include provisions for pets. In those instances, residents were not sure that pets would be accommodated, and in some instances, vehicles could accommodate members of the family and pets. Some families decided to remain out of concern for the welfare of their pets.
- **The influence of others:** With the increased presence of social media, the number of sources of influence have increased significantly. Decision makers are influenced by peers and other family members.

In 2008, Andrea Thompson published "Why People Ignore Hurricane Evacuation Warnings". In that article she reported the observations of Rebecca Morss of the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado. The interviews took place after Hurricane Ike struck Galveston. In that event, almost 140,000 stragglers were caught in the winds and water of the hurricane. Morss' observations acknowledged important previously ignored realities. She observed that not everyone could evacuate because every American does not own a car. Others did not have enough money to pay for gas, food, or hotels for an indefinite period. Communication problems existed because they only spoke a foreign language, were hearing impaired, or were socially isolated.

² [Why Some People Won't Evacuate: FEMA research \(phys.org\)](https://phys.org/news/2018-10-people-wont-evacuate-fema.html) (https://phys.org/news/2018-10-people-wont-evacuate-fema.html).

Research and surveys of individuals and families who did not evacuate ahead of a serious storm suggest other characteristics play a significant role in decisions to stay or evacuate.

The Lisa Wade findings and conclusions stand in stark contrast to the approach and findings of Stacey Willett. Writing in the "Pacific Standard" on August 31, 2015, Ms. Wade found that many New Orleans residents did not evacuate from Katrina because they could not³. In fact, a large portion of New Orleans residents would have evacuated if they had the ability to leave. A large portion of those who did not evacuate were in effect, left behind.

The first important observation in the Wade article was that 27% of New Orleans residents did not own a car. Of those left behind 25% were suffering from a chronic disease, 23% stayed to care for a physically disabled person, and 14% were themselves physically disabled. Of those left behind, 93% were black, 55% did not have access to a car, 57% earned less than \$20,000 per year, and 68% did not have money in a bank and did not have a useable credit card.

More recently, the National Science Foundation has funded a number of studies to examine resistance to evacuation. In one of a series of studies, Dr. Roxanne Cohen Silver found that responsiveness to public evacuation commands was related to the amount of media that individuals consumed prior to the public warning. There was a significant mismatch between the geographical identification of the danger area and the perception of danger by members of the public. In Florida, 250% of the evacuation took place outside of the area designated by emergency managers⁴.

Emergency Management planners who assume that evacuation is an option for all the residents who receive notice of an approaching storm may make a false assumption. In some cases, a rational person may conclude they are at less risk if they stay put than they would be in and during the evacuation process.

Why the Gullah/Geechee Don't Evacuate

In this case study, members of Gullah communities on St. Helena's Island, Hilton Head Island, and Brunswick Island were asked if they had evacuated in advance of hurricanes Florence and/or Matthew. If they had not evacuated or if family members had not evacuated, what factors led to that decision. They were also asked how they would respond if local officials announced that their island was in the path of a category 3 hurricane and what factors would go into their decision.

Their responses are set out below:

Some People Cannot Leave

Some people have medical and mobility issues that make travel at least as dangerous as sheltering in place. There are bedridden and wheelchair bound residents. Some residents require connection to oxygen or dialysis equipment. If they have generators, they feel safer at a place where mobility is not

³ [Who Didn't Evacuate for Hurricane Katrina? article](https://psmag.com/environment/who-didnt-evacuate-for-hurricane-katrina). (<https://psmag.com/environment/who-didnt-evacuate-for-hurricane-katrina>).

⁴ Evacuation Decision-making: How People Make Choices in Disasters. Roxanne Cohen Silver, Ellen Holman, Mansour Fabiemi, National Science Foundation supported study, UC-Irvine.

a problem, and the electricity source is dependable. These conditions are more prevalent among the elderly, so the variable is usually listed as age when it is really the medical or mobility considerations of the elderly that may be a more important factor than their age.

No Place to Go

Surprisingly, in Beaufort County and Jasper County, there are no emergency shelters maintained by local government. In the case of an evacuation order, the South Carolina Emergency Management Department (SCEMD) recommends St. Helena's Island and Hilton Head Island evacuees go to stay with friends or family as the first option. Hotels or motels are recommended as a second option.

On the islands, the Gullah/Geechee communities are insular communities. They are family and community focused. Many community members view places outside of their communities as inhospitable. Residents of low-income and rural communities usually have fewer places to go outside of their communities than others. Race and regional racial history are factors in calculations on how and where to find hospitable accommodations.

In the racially and residentially segregated South and in culturally insular communities, outside communities are often accurately perceived as inhospitable. In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, surrounding counties made it clear that Katrina evacuees were not welcome. In documented events, evacuees were turned back by law enforcement officials of surrounding counties. The residents of low-income sections of the city were not welcome in affluent sections of New Orleans. Powerful economic interests in New Orleans insisted that displaced city residents be placed outside of New Orleans rather than in the parks or the "historic" sections of the city.

We Cannot Leave Grandma

The academic studies cite age as an important factor. Age was not cited in any of the conversations with members of the Gullah community. But there was a significant overlap between the fact of seniority and significant health issues.

Island residents have strong cultural ties and family connections. That often means that community members felt that they have an obligation to stay with elderly family members or with friends who cannot evacuate because of health or mobility issues.

Costs

Evacuation is not a cost-free proposition. It has been estimated that a three-day evacuation costs between \$300.00 and \$525.00. The Federal Reserve found that 40% of Americans do not have emergency savings sufficient to handle a \$400.00 emergency. Given that a large portion of the Gullah/Geechee community falls within the lowest quintile of the economic sector, it should be expected that at least 50% of them would see cost as a significant barrier to evacuation.

One in three residents of the state of South Carolina are African American. Economic disparity becomes a significant issue whenever public policy is addressed to communities with significant African American populations. There is usually a significant overlap between significant African American presence and low-income households. 24% of the African American community in South Carolina lives below the poverty line. The Gullah/Geechee community in particular, lives away from urban centers and can logically be presumed to have an even higher poverty level. Evacuation

policies for the Gullah/Geechee community would only make sense if the policies and procedures make sense in the context of low-income limitations.

The economic profile of low-income communities also poses a barrier to “preparation” for significant weather events. 40% of the New Orleans community that did not evacuate for Katrina earned \$20,000.00 or less per year. For the Gullah/Geechee, the evacuation procedures and policies apparently have been developed with predominantly white middle income communities in mind. For most of the Gullah/Geechee community, policies such as maintaining an evacuation kit containing sufficient food to sustain the family for three days or evacuating to nearby hotels for an indeterminate period of time are policies that can only be applied in a parallel universe.

Asked specifically about barriers to evacuation of St. Helena’s Island, the county administrator identified the cost of evacuation as the most significant barrier. As part of that conversation, he also noted that much of the island community was connected to the tourism economy and many were required to remain to protect hotels and other parts of the tourism economy. The jobs identified usually did not have excused leave as a feature of the employment.

Health/mobility Issues

Dependence on medications and medical equipment may be a restricting factor. Health conditions among the Gullah/Geechee include diabetes and requires regular access to insulin. Other conditions include obesity, hypertension, and the use of dialysis and breathing (CPAP) machines. In addition to mobility issues, some citizens have significant health issues that make evacuation impractical. The ill may depend on electricity or battery driven machinery for life support. It may be rational to risk high winds and flooding rather than being stuck for hours in a long traffic jam.

Communications

Communications with the Gullah/Geechee community is a critical element in encouraging evacuation. The communications can be broken into three elements. Those are technology, content, and culturally appropriate transmission.

The first issue raised is the manner in which the impending danger and evacuation orders are communicated to the community. Much of the community listens to radio stations that feature the music and commentary of Black artists, personalities, and gospel music. It was suggested that younger adults who worked in the outside world followed regular broadcast TV channels but few followed cable news channels. In fact, given the geographical and relatively sparse distribution of the community on St. Helena Island, cable TV was not readily available. Because houses and family settlements are so dispersed in the Gullah communities, many families rely on satellite television. Those who subscribed to satellite stations noted that satellite television transmission is usually interrupted during significant weather events.

Emergency managers have become enamored of the new possibilities available to communicate through the internet and across social media platforms. Reliance on those tools assumes fairly widespread broadband and internet access. That assumption does not hold for low income and rural communities and broadband deserts. That form of communication also assumes a level of internet access and competence that may not be present in low-income or rural communities, especially among the elderly.

Social media may be a double-edged sword. Social scientists tell us that social media preferences differ by race and ethnicity. Just as social media platforms can extend penetration into communities at a lower cost with smaller manpower investments, it is also the source of significant sources of misinformation that may contradict or challenge “official” information. Communities with a high level of distrust in government tend to migrate toward alternative and easily available sources of information.

The content and format of emergency communications is important. Government communications and notices are often drafted in a way that is dependent on the use of government jargon. To members of a culture like the Gullah culture or for language minorities the content of communications may be incomprehensible, overly complex, and misdirected.

The content of communications should be culturally appropriate. First, communication should come through trusted sources and should be distributed in a way that reaches community residents. Effective cross-cultural communications often depend on the cultural awareness of the communicator.

Typically, government officials see themselves as the official and “trusted messenger” battling misinformation. In fact, in communities like the Gullah/Geechee, government officials may be seen as the untrustworthy messenger. Government officials should understand that the task in the case of the Gullah community is to communicate in an environment of widespread distrust. In these cases, emergency management officials must learn some cultural humility and seek out religious and community-based, trusted leadership in order to acquire credibility.

Fear of Loss of Property or Personal Property

The loss of property could come from natural forces, at the hands of strangers, or at the hands of government. Some homesites and farms sit on isolated backroads. Some residents believe that they do not have the option to leave on short notice. One interviewee stated that he had chickens and livestock on his farm. He could not leave the animals alone for an indeterminate period of time.

The fact that approximately 40% of Black southerners inherited their land through informal transfers, (known as heir's property) presents significant problems if the homeowner applies for disaster assistance after a natural disaster. According to the Center for Heir's Property Preservation, more than 108,000 acres of property located in 15 counties in South Carolina are held in low-income Black communities. The absence of formal documentation also makes the land ownership vulnerable to land speculators and government action.

Transportation Issues

Some residents do not have transportation appropriate for evacuation. Communities with an agricultural and fishing economic base may not have adequate public transportation. Some islanders rely on neighbors or relatives for transportation. They would depend on neighbors leaving and having space in the car to evacuate. Public transportation is also often inadequate in low-income urban areas.

On these islands, the reliance on automobiles is less than might be expected. Hilton Head Island and St. Helena Island cover about 65 square miles. St. Simons Island covers about 17 square miles. It is not unusual for members of Gullah/Geechee communities to move from point to point by walking or

on bicycles. These transportation modes would have little utility in the case of mandatory evacuation orders.

For those who own cars, there was the issue of the condition of the car or pickup truck. In the case of regional hurricane warnings, evacuees with cars, credit cards, and the ability to leave home or work early, usually reserve all of the available hotel space for at least 100 miles from the coast. Several people said they would have to travel at least 100 miles to find accommodations and they did not trust the car or truck to make the required round trip.

County emergency management administrators recognize the problem posed by lack of reliable transportation. Here, the small geographic area of the islands works to the advantage of the population. On St. Helena's Island and Hilton Head Island, the administrators have established a registry for those who need transportation in case of an emergency. There is a contract with a private transportation company to pick up the residents and transport them a gathering point for transportation to a shelter.

Traffic

Beaufort County lies between the Atlantic Ocean and U.S. Highway 95, the North-South highway that runs from Maine to Florida. There are regular traffic jams and slowdowns on highway 95 from the Hilton Head Island intersection to the Georgia state line 12 miles away. When hurricanes approach the coast from the South, highway 95 becomes a major route of escape for Florida and Georgia residents.

The Gullah/Geechee population is found on the barrier islands. During the period of isolation, they built their homes in locations to avoid ocean surges, and this means in almost all instances, evacuation, leaving by way of the one bridge to the mainland. Everyone has been ordered to leave and there is only one way off the island. From there, they are directed to a major freeway that is clogged with interstate traffic. It is rational to weigh the traffic difficulties against seeking secure cover on the island.

When mandatory evacuation orders are given, highway 95 backs up to the point of travel that normally takes 30 minutes would take hours to traverse. The traffic from the islands pile onto the highway along with evacuating traffic from Georgia and Florida. Cars and trucks regularly run out of gas on the highway during evacuations. Evacuation by car can be a dangerous gamble. In the words of one of the interviewees, "I would rather die at home than on the highway".

The Actions of Public Officials

In the state of South Carolina, only the governor can declare a state of emergency and issue a mandatory order of evacuation. There does not appear to be a statutory penalty for failure to evacuate in the face of a mandatory order. Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina are politically conservative states. As can be seen in the state COVID-19 responses, residents often resist what is viewed as unwarranted government attempts to influence decisions that should be a matter of "personal responsibility".

Fundamental to Black political culture, especially in the South, is mistrust of governmental authority. This mistrust is based on historical and current use of governmental authority to exploit or marginalize Black communities. On St. Helena's Island, the Gullah residents do not trust county

government. In the opinion of each of the community leaders consulted, the county government was the main source of exploitation of the community.

Throughout the South, FEMA and state emergency management agencies have earned a reputation for denial of applications for aid from the Gullah/Geechee communities and for denials of appeals⁵. On St. Helena Island and Hilton Head Island there are still blue tarps on houses that remain from hurricanes three years past. The existence of these tarps in Gullah/Geechee communities support the general belief that elected and appointed officials are not responsive to the needs of the Gullah/Geechee communities.

In this context, it is important to recognize that residents may not make distinctions among the actions of federal, state, and local officials. It is popularly understood that FEMA is the main actor in the aftermath of nationally declared natural disasters. The fact that aid does not reach African American communities in an equitable way is ascribed to “the government”. There is a common belief that attempted interaction with FEMA is a frustrating and unrewarding process.

No Leave Options

All workers, particularly hourly and “essential” workers do not have paid leave or the option to leave work even in the face of significant weather events. Nurses, firemen, and policemen would normally be required to stay close by in case of an impending disaster. Over the past half century, the land previously occupied by the Gullah/Geechee people has been transformed from farming and fishing communities into a tourism-based economy. A significant portion of the Gullah/Geechee community is employed in the tourism economy and as a result are expected to remain available to their hotel and tourism-based employers. They may be required to remain at work throughout the weather threat or they may be permitted to leave only after guests have evacuated and the premises are secured.

Famously, employees at Waffle House are instructed to retrieve clothing and personal effects from home and move into hotels reserved by their employer to ride out storms so that they can be prepared to feed first responders in the recovery stage of the disaster. Timing matters too: weekend evacuations can cost less, particularly for those without paid sick leave or vacation time.

The Disaster Supply Kit

Emergency management officials often recommend disaster supply kits (also known as “go kits”) for evacuees. Those recommended “kits” include cash, credit cards, and copies of important documents such as wills, deeds, medical records, and insurance documents. The recommendations include three days’ worth of non-perishable food, and a portable radio. The disaster supply assumes the resources available to middle income white Americans. The wealth of the average white family is at least 10 times the wealth of the average Black family. In South Carolina, more than 30% of the Black population lives below the poverty line. When asked about this level of pre-evacuation preparation, most respondents suggested that the recommendations were directed to a population that lived in a different universe.

⁵ FEMA: Don't Drive the Gullah-Geechee from their Land, Albert George, The Hill, April 14, 2021.

Pets

It was notable that pets were never raised in interviews with the Gullah people or emergency management officials. At least one islander had mentioned livestock as an issue, but emergency management officials say that communities that once had an agricultural and fishing base had all but disappeared. A new shelter under construction in an adjacent county would allow for the sheltering of pets.

Hurricane Fatigue

Both the Baker and Willett surveys cite previous experience with hurricanes as a source of evacuation resistance. Residents along the Atlantic Coast from Florida to North Carolina have more experience with hurricanes than other parts of the country. Those who have been subject to the outer winds of hurricanes or who live in elevated areas not subject to ocean surges often conclude that hurricane impacts are overstated. When they evacuated, then returned to their homes to find minimum damage and disruption, they begin to question whether or not evacuation is worth the expense and trouble. The inhabitants of the barrier islands sometimes characterize the local emergency management officials as purveyors of “death and destruction” that does not materialize. Gullah interviewees usually expressed the sentiment that government warnings tended to overstate the impending danger.

Conclusions

Evacuation plans are an important component of emergency management planning in Gulf and Atlantic Coast states. Effective evacuation plans save lives. But the particulars of effective evacuation plans must be built around the social realities of local populations. The academic research, local and national media reports, and interviews with members of Gullah/Geechee communities suggest that current evacuation policies and procedures along the Southeastern Atlantic Coast do not serve Gullah/Geechee communities well.

Care should be taken to address the needs of the most vulnerable groups within these communities. Generic evacuation plans and procedures may not serve communities well that have distinct racial, language, cultural populations, and workers of low-income status. In many cases, these sectors of the community are most in need of support if evacuations are to result in equitable outcomes.

Evacuation plans that cover racially, culturally, and economically diverse communities should assume that a larger portion of those communities that otherwise might be expected to evacuate will be unable or unwilling to leave. The Morss and Wade observations cited above are important because they suggest that the most pressing issue in evacuation planning is appropriate support for those segments of the population that may not be able to evacuate. The Morss and Wade observations also make it clear that racial composition, ethnicity, culture, language, and community income levels and distribution are important variables in determining a community's capacity to prepare for and respond to a significant weather event.

Given the racial, cultural, and income characteristics of Gullah/Geechee communities, an evacuation plan should anticipate significantly lower compliance with mandatory evacuation orders. That lower compliance rate is not based on complacency. Significant portions of the communities cannot evacuate due to cost, lack of reliable transportation, and no place to go. Due to the historical absence of equitable government support, the Gullah/Geechee communities have developed

organic defenses and responses to hurricanes. One of those responses has been to build family compounds away from areas that are vulnerable to storm surges and high winds.

This case study has led to two important observations. The first is that 100% compliance with a mandatory evacuation order is an extremely rare event. The failure to comply with such orders is not always a measure of defiance. In many communities, the failure to comply arises from the fact that residents cannot evacuate or that it reasonably appears that residents would be safer if they remained in their homes. The inability to evacuate is often related to cost or attachment to a family member who is unable to evacuate. They are also likely to be the residents most in need of support. The conclusion is that evacuation plans should plan as much for the needs of those who cannot evacuate as for those who are able and do evacuate. Those who most easily evacuate tend to be the most privileged segments of the community. An evacuation plan will lead to more equitable outcomes if it encompasses the needs of that portion of the community most in need of support.

The second important observation is that research and administrative reviews of community responses to emergencies, (especially reviews conducted by government units) do not list distrust of government as a problem in shaping communication strategies. The agencies often communicate in approved government verbiage and acronyms that the citizenry find complex and confusing. Government agencies usually think of themselves as the "legitimate" source of information and often refer the community to other government sources as confirmation.

And yet when race and culture are involved, the fact that the communication is from "government" and delivered in a culturally inappropriate manner may itself be a significant barrier to acceptance and compliance. Government entities should develop plans to communicate critical information through trusted messengers and sources in complex populations.

"How oonah da do?" (How are you all doing? in the Gullah/Geechee dialect.) America is a multiracial, multicultural, and an increasingly multilingual society. Racial, cultural, and linguistic minorities constitute more than 40% of the residents of the states most vulnerable to hurricanes, floods, and wildfires. Evacuation plans should reflect those realities. Special measures should be taken to assure that the effectiveness of evacuation plans is not limited by linguistic, cultural, or racial biases.

In part, Gullah/Geechee communities feel free to ignore "official" directives because those directives are disconnected from the realities of Gullah/Geechee life. In a meeting at the Penn center, it became clear that the Gullah community was not aware that Beaufort County had an emergency management plan and did not know how to access the plan. The Gullah community views this fact as an extension of the historical exclusion of the community from important public discussions and decisions. Area evacuation plans will be significantly improved if the Gullah/Geechee communities are involved in the development and implementation of the emergency management plan.



Figure 1. [Map of the Gullah/Geechee cultural heritage corridor](http://southcarolinaherald.com/throughout-the-gullah-geechee-cultural-heritage-corridor-today-there-are-vibrant-and-historic-gullah-geechee-communities-we-encourage-you-to-learn-more-about-the-gullah-geechee-people-and-their-uniq/)

(<http://southcarolinaherald.com/throughout-the-gullah-geechee-cultural-heritage-corridor-today-there-are-vibrant-and-historic-gullah-geechee-communities-we-encourage-you-to-learn-more-about-the-gullah-geechee-people-and-their-uniq/>)

Notes on Methodology

This survey of attitudes among the Gullah/Geechee was not designed to be a “scientific” study. Sample size and response rates do not apply because the author did not send out a survey. Interviews were conducted in person. The author selected government offices based on the role that they occupy in the area evacuation process. Other interviews were conducted with individuals on a random basis and voluntary basis. Names are included only when the interviewees gave express permission for the use of their names.

Review of literature on evacuations:

- Review of media reports on Gullah refusal to evacuate.
 - Review local and national media reports on evacuation for Hurricane Matthew.
 - Review local and national media reports on evacuation for Hurricane Florence.
- Local Emergency Management Organizations.
 - Lee Levesque, Director of Emergency Management, Bluffton, S.C.
 - Lt. Colonel Neil Baxley, Director, Department of Emergency Management, Beaufort County, S.C.

- Staff, Emergency Management Office, Hilton Head Island, S.C.
- Interviews with Gullah support organizations.
 - Executive Director and Island residents at Penn School, St. Helena's Island, S.C.
 - Staff, Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, John's Island, S.C.
 - Albert George, Ph.D., founder, Resilience Initiative for Coastal Education (RICE).
 - Sheryse N. DuBose, Administrator, Historic Neighborhood Preservation, Hilton Head Island, S.C.
 - Josh Walden, Esq. COO, Center for Heirs Property Preservation, Charleston, S.C.
 - Louise Cohen, Executive Director, Gullah Museum of Hilton Head Island.
- Interviews with members of the Gullah community.
 - Barber shop, Hilton Head Island.
 - Barber Shop, St. Helena's Island.
 - Beauty shop, St. Helena's Island.

Instructor Notes

This project was originally conceived as an investigation into the attitudes of the Gullah/Geechee people toward governmental mandatory evacuation orders. As the information was gathered, it occurred to the author that the information could be formatted as a class exercise. These “class notes” are in fact a suggestion for a class exercise designed to help emergency managers understand the importance of cultural, and occasionally, racial awareness when shaping preparedness and recovery strategies.

An Exercise

The Scene

The exercise begins by notifying each member of the class that they have been dispatched to the emergency management office of Beaufort County, South Carolina. A hurricane is approaching, and it appears that the sea islands and the coastal areas along the lower South Carolina Coast will be impacted by category 3 winds and a significant and sustained tidal surge. NOAA projects landfall along the Carolina Coast in four days. It appears that the hurricane will make landfall on the islands of St. Helena and Hilton Head and the town of Beaufort. The governor has issued a mandatory

evacuation order for all counties east of Highway 95 from and including Charleston County south to the Georgia-South Carolina line.

As you begin to set up, you get a call from intergovernmental affairs. They have received calls from Senator Tim Scott, Congresswoman Macy, and Congressman Jim Clyburn. They are all concerned that the local media is full of statements stating that the Gullah community will not evacuate. The congressional delegation notes that Gullah communities are particularly vulnerable to hurricanes. They want to know if it is true that the Gullah communities will not evacuate. If the Gullah communities will not evacuate, they want to know why they are refusing to evacuate and what steps you will take to address the problem.

The community relations section has arranged a meeting with community leaders to take place in two days to discuss the overall strategy for evacuation, return, and recovery.

Next Steps

1. The exercise begins by presenting a question to the class participants: who are the Gullah/Geechee people?
2. After time has been given to reply to that question, the class is provided background information describing the demography and cultural characteristics of the Gullah/Geechee communities.
3. The class is then asked to identify and discuss the reasons that the Gullah people might be resisting orders to evacuate.
4. After discussion of the reasons identified by the class, the class is presented with the results of studies on why people located in similar communities resist orders to evacuate.
5. Then the class is presented the answers presented by members of the Gullah community.
6. The next portion of the exercise is to have the class separate into groups of three or more to develop effective responses to the concerns of the Gullah community. In short, what is to go into the response to the congressional offices.
7. The final portion of the exercise is to discuss potential recommendations as a whole class to an appropriate evacuation plan. The objective is to see if the class can develop culturally appropriate solutions.
8. Have the class discuss a strategy for the meeting with community leaders.

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